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The Clipper Visits...

Marcia Solberg



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By JANICE NEUBAUER

In a community that cares about its history, the director of the organization dedicated to the preservation and dissemination of that history holds a significant position with a great deal of responsibility. Marcia Solberg, one month into her new job as executive director of the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society, feels her responsibility keenly. "This is a vital organization. We are conservators of our heritage in Duxbury."

In the parlor of the society's headquarters, the Drew House on Washington St., surrounded by antiques and portraits, Solberg talked of her goals and hopes for the society. Above all she wants to get the word out that this is a vibrant organization of interesting people who get very actively involved. The membership of around 800 is a healthy mixture of people prominent for years in shaping the town and relative newcomers.

One of the first things someone moving here usually notices is that it is a town "immersed in history." Solberg relates that when she and her family moved to Duxbury in 1977, she was impressed that everyone she met knew so much about the town and its history. "I wanted to know too."

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She has been active in the society for 12 years, served on the executive committee for years and was president from 1992-1994. Like her, many people become members to learn and get involved with the more academic aspects. Others join for social reasons. "There are so many different ways to go." She points out that those who come to learn end up meeting others with similar interests and those who are attracted by the social aspects, often become avid learners.

To help get the society's message out, Solberg will be working with a public relations person who lives in town. She stresses that you don't have to be an historian or live in an old house to be a member. You don't even have to live in Duxbury.

And, as Solberg points out, December is an excellent time to join. If you join immediately, you can be a guest at the prestigious members' party this Thursday, Dec. 5, in conjunction with the gala events at the King Caesar House, the house owned in the 1800's by Duxbury's notable shipbuilder, Ezra Weston II, dubbed "King Caesar."

Once each year in December, the house is decorated as it would have been when Jerusha and Ezra Weston entertained family and friends, and the community has an opportunity to go back in time and pretend that they are guests of the Westons. The annual opening has become a highlight of Christmas festivities in Duxbury.

This year's theme is "Maritime Merriment—a Sea Captain's Christmas." From the experience of other years, Solberg estimates that around 400 people will attend the party, and another 500 will visit the house when it is open Friday, Saturday and Sunday, Dec. 6-8, from 1 to 4:30.

A dozen committees have been working on the event for over a month. A committee chair is appointed to decorate each room or area, and that person selects a team to help. Decorations are kept as authentic as possible, in keeping with the 19th century when the Westons lived in the house. The preparations involve over 50 people plus the hostesses.

The event also includes a gift shop, an innovation introduced in 1992 by Solberg in her first year as president. This year the shop will include some interesting crafts as well as the antiques offered in past years.

The Duxbury Rural & Historical Society has a long history itself. It was established as the Rural Society in 1883, when the town was in an economic slump, and

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dedicated in the first bylaws "to improve and ornament the streets of the town." They began by purchasing street lamps and planting trees. The society's history, preserved in a pamphlet written in 1983 by James Otis Post, shows that members began and later spearheaded the very successful land conservation movement in Duxbury that culminated in the establishment of the Conservation Commission in 1962, which battled through many town meetings to acquire a green belt of town-owned land.

Solberg affirms that advocacy is still a very important role of the society, and that they take the "rural" part of their name seriously. "We're involved with other town committees to protect and conserve the rural aspects of our community, to maintain open space and make it accessible to people by creating marked walking trails." The society is part of the Bay Circuit Trail, a network working for greenbelt connecting Boston to Cape Cod. As part of this effort, the society has opened a portion of land under its control. Members are faithful about calling the office to let the society know of any meetings or pending decisions that may have impact on the town's appearance or future growth.

The society owns approximately 157 acres, including Drew House on Washington St., the King Caesar House on King Caesar Rd., the Gershom Bradford House on Tremont St., and "Cedarfield" (the 2nd oldest house on Clark's Island in Plymouth Bay) along with land and the great boulder at the island's highest point that the Pilgrims named "Election Rock" where they elected to have their first religious service in the new world.

One of the directions Solberg would like to take is toward a presentation of living history, a trend of museums' response to the public's desire to learn about the past. While some people are genuinely interested in viewing artifacts and antiques, more are wondering what

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the people were like and how they lived. "If you walked into the King Caesar House and were transported to the 19th century—what would you see? What would they be doing? Who would be visiting?"

She admits there is much they don't know about the Westons. "We know his accomplishments and we know births and deaths, that kind of information. We know he was aggressive and worked hard on his business. We have records that show him getting into his carriage and driving all night in the cold to get to Boston to do his business in the morning. But we don't know what they were like as people and what their relationships were like."

One of the mysteries that intrigue those who study the Westons is whether Jerusha had any influence on how the house was decorated. In that era, the men usually made that kind of decision. "We don't know what her personality was like. Maybe she had influence. Maybe she was a strong personality. We don't know. We'd love to know!"

More is known about the Bradfords, whose house remained in the family until it was donated to the society. When families sell houses, much is lost forever. Furniture and records are scattered throughout the family and much gets discarded. "When you get a property like the Bradford House, it's much more special because you have all that documentation. More is intact." Because Jerusha Weston was a Bradford, there is a possibility of discovering more about her in old records.

A recent examination by a consultant from the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities has uncovered another mystery. The consultant discovered that the roof line had been changed at the Bradford house; it was a hip roof and now it's not. The change was made early on and the front porch of the house was peaked, with decorative windows added in the

caves. "The Bradfords were very conservative people and it's not something they would have just done frivolously. Why did they change the roof? And so shortly after it was built? It was totally out of character for the Bradford family."

Questions keep piling up as members delve into records. It was not until after Jerusha died that Ezra expanded the dining room and kitchen. "Today we'd think that was strange because it's usually the wives who want better kitchen and dining facilities."

The nickname "King Caesar" is another puzzle. Was he called this as an acknowledgement of his power, or did people use the name in a derogatory way? Maybe the answer is both. And how did he react to the name?

Some attempts have been made already to work toward adding some personal notes to the King Caesar tours. Several years ago, a training program for docents was started. At the same time, junior docents were hired to supplement the volunteer tour leaders. "So we're taking small steps in that direction. It's not easy to jump into unless you have totally paid staff." Volunteer Corinne Woodworth went to a seminar to study the portraits and trained others to incorporate some of what is known so the tour leaders were talking about people: "who these people were, what their relationship was to Duxbury and what their relationship was to the Westons."

Funding is key to changing the tours to present more living history. Solberg would like to see the society initiate a capital fund drive. She worries about the upkeep of the King Caesar House. The fund raising in the 1960's raised enough to purchase the house, but not enough to endow it. "If you don't have an endowment, you're constantly struggling to try to maintain the building." The house could use paint, and the fabric in

the draperies is disintegrating. "When people walk into that house they expect to see it as it was when the Westons were living there. If it's shabby, it's not true. This was a prominent, well-to-do family. It would have been elegant. We have to strive to bring back that feeling."

In contrast, "When you go into the Bradford house, you don't expect elegance because that wasn't the way they lived." Their house has a sense of comfort, the lived-in feeling of a family home. The furniture is Bradford furniture and the wallpaper and fabrics have been restored.

Another problem Solberg and the society face is the difficulty of getting the number of volunteers it needs with so many people working now. It is an organization dependent on its volunteers and although it has many people giving enormous amounts of time and talent the need is greater than the supply. She is exploring ways to tap into people with special expertise in the work force who want to do some community service. "A lot of companies encourage community service."

She is trying to find a way for people to volunteer for one day a month in a significant way using their special knowledge and abilities rather than asking them for an overwhelming amount of time. She would like to create some bus tours for other historical societies which then could be publicized to other groups. This would add income, but would mean expanding and improving the tour, which again would need funding.

For the present, Solberg is exploring grants and will be applying for available funds. She has expanded the hours the Drew House is open: the offices are now open 9 to 5. On a table in the parlor, books and pamphlets published by the society are available for purchase. Also for sale are postcards, posters, photographs, book bags, and T-shirts.

Solberg is especially proud of the library in the Drew House. Materials owned by the society are much more accessible now to the public through the work of the society's library committee, which was established around 1993. She gives full credit to Molly Matson, a retired university librarian, and Town Historian Katherine Pillsbury, a trained archivist, who head that committee, for "a wonderful job organizing and cataloging." They and their assistants have been working every other week for the past 3 years making sense of the books, papers, photographs, pamphlets, etc. so that the public can better use this treasure.

Another massive job of organizing and study, spearheaded by textile curator Elisa Fontaine, has been

done on the extensive textile collection that had been packed away in the attic for years. A conservator was called in several years ago to advise on the restoration and use of the fabric and authentic clothing. Some of these pieces will be on display during the Christmas King Caesar tour.

Mickail Simmons, volunteer curator of the King Caesar and Bradford houses, has been cataloging objects and creating a photographic record.

Solberg believes in the importance of continuing and expanding educational programs in cooperation with the schools. Every year 2nd graders are given a bus tour of the town's historical places and the 5th graders are given a walking tour. She reports that parents often first hear about the society and the King Caesar House from their children and call after the class tours, their interest stimulated by the excitement of the children.

The Solbergs chose Duxbury as their home because both she and husband, Paul, had grown up in Massachusetts and loved the South Shore. They built a house in 1977, and in 1984 bought the house on Washington St. where they now live. "I've always been interested in historic architecture and had always wanted to live in an antique house." Coincidentally, the house had been built by a Weston—Church Weston—in 1833. It had been date boarded by researcher Ann Noyes, who used to play in the house as a child when her grandmother lived there.

The Solbergs have 4 daughters ranging in age from 27 to 7. Kirsten has a Masters in Art History from NYU and is director of operations for the graduate computer art division at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Erika went to Yale, where she majored in English. She is now in her 3rd year of a fellowship in creative writing at Louisiana State University, where she is working on her novel. Ingrid attended Barnard and is now living in Boston where she will start classes at the Museum of Fine Arts in January. Daughter Quemby is 7 and in 2nd grade at DES.

Solberg, musing about her older daughters' choice of careers in the arts—(her husband is in business and she was originally a math teacher)—said, "It must have been all those books I read to them." Reading has always been

a passion, and her only regret about this new job is that she no longer has time to read. She makes up for this lack by using Books on Tape from the library, putting on earphones and listening to a book as she does her household chores. "It's wonderful. I actually look forward to doing laundry now."

Although she laughingly says her job description seems to be "There's all this that needs to be done and you're the only one to do it." Solberg is obviously undaunted by the challenges and very much at home in her office, with its panoramic view of the Bluefish River. "It's like a living picture. The marsh colors change constantly."

Those who know her capabilities and have worked with her are confident that the society is in good hands and that she is very much part of that living picture.

